

Article

Dart: A River-Voyage

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Dart: A River-Voyage

Dart caused such a stir when it was published because it took the long poem away from the urban settings of *The Waste Land* or *Howl*, and transplanted it to waterways, moors and tors. On its pages, readers can hear the speech of walkers, naturalists, canoeists and river-spirits from folklore. Crab fishermen and chambermaids don't often make their voices heard between the minimalist covers of a Faber & Faber volume. Local people go 'slammicking' and 'bivvering' about their business on the riverbank; earthy dialect lends a regional feel to many of the passages. Both learned and disarmingly accessible, Oswald's book has managed the rare feat of appealing to book clubs as well as poetry prize judges. Oswald said that 'I don't think it is a poet's poem. Some poets were uneasy because it broke so many rules.' The result was that *Dart* 'broke free of the almost closed circle of modern poetry,' according to journalist Kate Kellaway.

The Alice Oswald who appeared in reviews of *Dart* and critiques of *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* was quintessentially English. She had been living and writing in the West Country, and working as a gardener. According to many critics at that time, her poetry appeared to be as rooted as the ancient oaks in Wistman's Wood. For David Wheatley, *Dart* celebrates 'the spirit of place.' Oswald inherits a tradition that comes from Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes or Geoffrey Hill, according to journalist Rachel Campbell-Johnstone. Examining her next collection, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, critic Tom Bristow declares that 'Oswald's home in Devon, the geography of the southwest of England, encourages a deep engagement with place, folk history and oral culture'. *Dart* was funded by the Poetry Society's Poetry Places scheme, which invites readings that focus on its rootedness. But this isn't the whole story.

Reviewers who find that Oswald celebrates the 'spirit of place' downplay Oswald's awareness of the mess that people are making of their river. *Dart* is brimming with muck, filth and pollution. Parasitic Cryptosporidion lurks in the water; the salmon breathe nitrates and oil. A sewage worker stands above a 'brown lagoon.' In her preoccupation with West Country water pollution, Oswald shares home turf and common themes with Ted Hughes (a draft poem in his archive is called 'Fishing for Mackerel in the Shit Sea'). But it's difficult to imagine Heaney or Hill quoting this in a poem: 'Unfortunately sheep don't use looppaper.'

Dart certainly celebrates the river, but the 'spirit of place' cannot be pinpointed on a map: it is in constant flux. The poem takes us on a voyage that has its roots in traditions from outside Britain. Oswald read Classics at Oxford, and localist readings of her work have missed how much use she makes of the literatures of Ancient Greece and Rome. British authors have a longstanding interest in Homer, Virgil and Ovid, but when Oswald retells the myth that the founder of Britain was a seafaring Trojan, she defies readings of her work as purely local. Syrinx and Ligeia emerge from the silt; a water-nymph seduces a woodsman with tales of Hylas and Salmacis. The exclamation 'O flumen Dialis' – O River of Zeus – maps the rituals of Ancient Rome onto contemporary Britain. Yachts have names from the local lass *Lizzie of Lymington* to the Greek voyager *Oceanides*. This list of the names of boats is a wink to Homer's catalogue of ships.

Fish, birds and human beings migrate as the poem follows waterways and sea-roads. Eels, 'bright whips of flow', appear after their journey from the Sargasso, each containing 'a fingerwidth of sea'. The salmon are 'all the way from Iceland, from the Faroes'. The ghost of a Norman tin extractor appears in the Dart's upper reaches; a Dartmoor wool-worker makes carpets for the Japanese market. A boatbuilder dreams of being 'out of here, in the Med' and a lad from Kevicks sets out in a catamaran, bound for New Zealand. The Dart links the local to global networks of travel and trade. Instead of praising a 'spirit of place' that is fixed and provincial, Oswald's work resonates with Doreen Massey's ideas of a 'progressive sense of place' or Ursula Heise's arguments for environmental cosmopolitanism.

From 'The three Wise Men of Gotham who Set Out to Catch the Moon in a Net' (1996) to *Nobody* (2018), her oceangoing adaptation of *The Odyssey* and *The Oresteia*, Oswald has been fascinated by voyages. She called a USA edition of her work *Space Craft Voyager I: New and Selected Poems*. *Dart* is a shifting river-Odyssey, a biography of water that is 'placeless in all places.'

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